



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

STATEMENT

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REGARDING A HEARING ON

*“DHS’s Efforts to Disrupt Transnational Criminal
Organizations in Central America”*

BEFORE THE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT, MANAGEMENT, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Meijer, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Oversight, Management, and Accountability:

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the efforts of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) to secure the homeland from transnational crime and threats. My statement will focus on the important role HSI plays internationally and domestically in identifying, disrupting, and dismantling transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) emanating from and associated with the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

The HSI Mission

As the principal investigative component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), HSI is a premier global law enforcement organization responsible for conducting federal criminal investigations into the illegal cross-border movement of goods, money, technology, people, and other contraband into, out of, and throughout the United States. HSI's workforce consists of more than 10,000 employees, including special agents, criminal analysts, and mission support personnel assigned to over 220 cities across the United States and over 81 locations around the world.

In collaboration with its strategic partners in the United States and abroad, HSI special agents gather evidence used to identify and build criminal cases against TCOs, terrorist networks and facilitators, and other criminal elements that threaten the homeland. HSI works with prosecutors to indict and arrest violators, execute criminal search warrants, seize criminally derived money and assets, and take other actions designed to disrupt and dismantle criminal organizations operating around the world. These efforts protect the national security and public safety of the United States.

The Nature of the Threat

TCOs represent a significant threat to our nation and our communities. During the last two decades, TCOs have expanded dramatically in size, scope, and impact, which poses a significant threat to national security. HSI is deep focused on the threat of TCOs and targets TCOs at every critical location in the cycle: internationally, in cooperation with foreign counterparts, where transnational criminal and terrorist organizations operate; at our nation's physical border and ports of entry, in coordination with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), where the smugglers attempt to exploit America's legitimate trade, travel, and transportation systems; and in cities throughout the United States, where criminal organizations earn substantial profits off of their illicit activities.

Mexico is a major source of production, as well as a transit country, for illicit drugs destined for the United States, including marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and, more recently, fentanyl. Mexico is not only a source of fentanyl production; it is also a transit country for fentanyl and precursor chemicals originating from Asia. In the last two decades, Mexico has also become the largest transit country for South American-sourced cocaine destined for the United States. The Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) countries serve as transit points for these drugs. Often, aircraft are used to transport narcotics from Venezuela and Colombia, destined to Honduras and Guatemala, for subsequent land transportation through Mexico and into the United States.

Transnational gangs from this region represent another threat to our nation's safety and security. La Mara Salvatrucha, also known as "MS-13," is a gang operating throughout the United States and Northern Triangle countries. Members and associates of MS-13 are expected to protect the name, reputation, and status of the gang from rival gang members and other persons. MS-13 members require that all individuals show respect and deference to the gang and its membership. To accomplish this, MS-13 members and associates are expected to use any means necessary to force respect from those who show disrespect, including acts of intimidation and violence. HSI led investigations have linked MS-13 gang members to a variety of organized criminal activity, including drug trafficking, extortion, and homicide.

Another significant concern for our country, human smuggling, involves the provision of a service – typically transportation, navigation, or fraudulent documents – to facilitate an individual's unauthorized entry into the United States. Harsh terrains and travel conditions, combined with the potential detection by law enforcement and the threat of violence posed by cartels controlling territory along smuggling routes across Central America and Mexico, make it difficult for migrants to travel from their home countries and reach our borders without the assistance of human smugglers. Criminal organizations play a major role in facilitating the smuggling of these noncitizens from their home countries and across our borders. U.S.-bound human smuggling and related criminal activities are estimated by the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center to produce revenues of between \$2 billion to \$6 billion per year.

While human smuggling may constitute the initial crime facilitating the illicit movement of people to our borders, the criminality does not stop there. In some cases, migrants become victims of human trafficking – a crime of exploitation that does not require movement – when criminal networks introduce force, fraud, or coercion into smuggling schemes to induce victims into forced labor or commercial sex acts.

HSI's investigations have also demonstrated that perpetrators of human smuggling and trafficking often concurrently or subsequently commit other transnational crimes such as gang activity, identity and benefit fraud, money laundering, bulk cash smuggling, narcotics smuggling, arms trafficking, and terrorism and other national security related crime.

HSI Response to TCOs

The multi-faceted, complex, transnational nature of the crimes surrounding TCOs requires an equally robust and layered investigative response, which HSI implements on multiple fronts. This starts abroad, where HSI has the largest international investigative presence within DHS, comprised of 81 offices in 53 countries with 41 visa security screening posts. This widespread presence continues domestically, where HSI special agents and criminal analysts respond to and pursue investigations into transnational organized crime. Both at home and abroad, HSI special agents utilize a broad and unique range of legal authorities; leverage strategic relationships; and provide resources, technology, and training in support of a whole-of-government approach to combating the TCO threat.

International Operations

HSI's international presence is a key facet of its approach to countering transnational organized crime. HSI special agents abroad develop and foster relationships with host government law

enforcement partners to exchange information, coordinate and support investigations, and facilitate enforcement actions and prosecutions to deter the ability of TCOs to smuggle drugs, people, and other contraband into and out of the United States. HSI and its foreign counterparts identify and target sources of supply and identify and disrupt transportation and smuggling routes. These efforts enable HSI and its partners to prevent dangerous narcotics and other illicit goods from reaching our borders, or to stop illicit southbound flows of illegally derived currency or weapons.

HSI maintains three attaché offices in the Northern Triangle countries – HSI Guatemala City, HSI San Salvador and HSI Tegucigalpa – and is expanding the HSI footprint in these locations. Each of the Northern Triangle Attaché offices has a Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit (TCIU), funded by HSI, which plays a critical role in its law enforcement efforts within the region. In 2011, HSI established the TCIU program to increase its reach in the fight against TCOs. HSI TCIUs comprise foreign law enforcement officials, customs officers, immigration officers, and prosecutors who undergo a strict vetting process and complete robust training. HSI TCIUs facilitate information exchange and rapid bilateral investigations involving violations that HSI has the authority to investigate, including narcotics smuggling; human smuggling and trafficking; weapons trafficking; money laundering and bulk cash smuggling; and other transnational criminal activity. More than 430 vetted and trained foreign law enforcement officers comprise the 13 TCIUs throughout the world. HSI special agents are uniquely positioned to partner with TCIU personnel to provide critical intelligence and resources to allow our partners to take appropriate enforcement action under the authority of the host country.

The Northern Triangle TCIUs have achieved significant law enforcement success in concert with HSI. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, pursuant to investigations and operations targeting transnational criminal activity, the HSI Guatemala City TCIU, the largest in the Northern Triangle, made 599 arrests, and seized \$1,036,206 USD, 31,164.78 pounds of cocaine, 11 aircraft, 17 firearms, and 10 vehicles. In FY 2020, the HSI San Salvador TCIU made 94 arrests and seized \$52,499 USD, 121 pounds of cocaine, nine firearms, and five vehicles. In FY 2020, the HSI Tegucigalpa TCIU made 99 arrests, and seized 1,078 pounds of cocaine, an aircraft and two firearms.

The close relationships built by HSI's TCIU program have led to unique opportunities to share information with law enforcement counterparts in the Northern Triangle in support of international efforts to combat TCOs in the region. In March 2021, HSI reinitiated the Operation CENTAM/Northern Triangle Initiative, deploying special agents to HSI attaché offices within the Northern Triangle to assist with targeting MS-13 gang members and other Northern Triangle-based TCOs operating in or connected to the United States. The initiative also focuses on developing and furthering Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force investigations across the United States and in the Northern Triangle countries. The agents coordinate with HSI Attaché office personnel, TCIU members, local law enforcement, and other federal agencies to augment, assist, and provide expertise to advance investigations into TCOs.

In May 2018, HSI initiated Operation Gatehouse, an initiative that deploys TCIU officers from Northern Triangle countries to the United States to assist HSI domestic field offices with targeting and investigating MS-13 gang members within the United States. As part of their assigned duties, TCIU officers assist HSI with criminal gang investigations and work closely with federal, state, and local partners to identify, disrupt, and dismantle transnational criminal gangs and organizations. Most recently, in May 2021, HSI deployed TCIU personnel from El Salvador and Honduras to HSI domestic field offices in furtherance of Gatehouse.

Recognizing the regional nature of TCOs within South and Central America, HSI launched Operation Citadel to identify, disrupt, and dismantle TCOs and terrorist support networks by targeting the mechanisms used to move migrants, illicit funds, and contraband throughout the region. Citadel provides resources to enhance foreign partners' investigative, intelligence, and information sharing capabilities to counter transnational threats and organized crime. In turn, this assistance provides HSI the ability to expand domestic and international investigations well beyond U.S. borders and to more effectively target the illicit pathways exploited by TCOs. Citadel facilitates training and capacity-building through cross-border operations with partner nation TCIUs, undercover operations, judicially-approved wire intercepts, and document and media exploitation at ports of entry and along smuggling routes.

Investigative activities also include sensitive site exploitation/evidence collection and biometric collection of extraterritorial criminal travel (ECT) subjects of special interest. HSI's ECT program is a partnership between HSI and the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) Criminal Division, Human Rights, and Special Prosecutions Section. The program uses expert dedicated investigative, prosecutorial and intelligence resources to target and aggressively pursue, disrupt, and dismantle foreign-based transnational human smuggling networks. ECT supports the highest-priority human smuggling investigations posing the greatest national security and public safety threats. These include investigations concerning special interest noncitizens and investigations that pose a significant humanitarian concern, to include maritime smuggling events, extortion, kidnapping, and corruption, among others.

Pushing our borders out to effectively identify and mitigate threats before they reach the United States remains a priority for DHS, HSI, and our counterparts. A key tool in this fight is the Biometric Identification Transnational Migration Alert Program (BITMAP). Pursuant to BITMAP, HSI trains and equips TCIUs and other cooperating foreign law enforcement officers to collect and share biometric and biographic data on suspects of particular interest, such as third-country nationals who are encountered by foreign law enforcement agencies at or along irregular border-crossing check points, illicit pathways, airports, seaports, jails, detention centers, and specialized mobile units. Foreign law enforcement partners share their collected BITMAP information with HSI, and this biometric data is used to populate U.S. databases and subsequently identify transnational criminals; known or suspected terrorists; gang members; and other persons of interest and prevent their travel to the United States. BITMAP information is also used to provide host-nation law enforcement partners with actionable intelligence related to terrorist, criminal, and national security threats.

The National Air Trafficking Initiative (NATI) is an HSI led initiative to address the transportation of narcotics from source countries to the United States by air, which is the preferred method of smuggling by many Colombian and Mexican drug cartels. HSI has partnered with CBP Air and Marine Operations, and other federal agencies to HSI's efforts to disrupt these smuggling routes by shutting down the transshipment of cocaine through Guatemala and Belize. These efforts have resulted in a decrease of air deliveries of narcotics. This investigation has resulted in historic interdictions, arrests, and seizures that have assisted several domestic HSI offices with their transnational narcotics smuggling investigations. To date, NATI has resulted in 63 arrests and the seizure of 59 aircraft valued at over \$23 million, \$15 million in U.S. currency, over 33,000 kilograms of cocaine, and 27 firearms, striking a serious blow to TCOs exploiting our nation's borders and furthering the efforts to disrupt and dismantle TCOs.

Domestic Operations

To complement its international focus, HSI's efforts continue at the border and within our domestic field offices, where HSI special agents respond to and investigate criminal schemes that are encountered or identified in the United States. Along the border, many investigations begin as reactive cases in response to seizures of drugs, money, guns, or other contraband, or to interdictions or apprehensions of undocumented noncitizens. Leads are also developed through a variety of other methods, including referrals from federal, state, and local law enforcement partners; confidential informants and sources of information; tip line or social media reporting; community relations and public affairs outreach; criminal analysis/targeting; and information gleaned from existing operations.

Upon receiving information into a potential crime, HSI uses the full breadth of its authorities and expertise to pursue the investigation and attack all aspects of the organizations responsible. HSI special agents work diligently to expand their cases to complex, multi-jurisdictional investigations targeting key individuals, communications, logistics networks, and vulnerabilities within a TCO's command structure. To do this, HSI special agents use sophisticated investigative tools and techniques to collect evidence and conduct operations designed to disrupt and dismantle TCO operations and mitigate the threat they pose to the homeland. These actions occur at home and abroad, involve key U.S. and foreign law enforcement partnerships, and require significant, long-term manpower and resource commitments.

While HSI conducts these activities in furtherance of the full spectrum of crimes that HSI investigates, the crimes that TCOs in the Northern Triangle most often pursue are the smuggling of narcotics and undocumented noncitizens into the United States; the smuggling of weapons and currency out of the United States; and the illegal operations of transnational gangs.

To combat narcotics smuggling, HSI special agents launch complex criminal investigations designed to expose and take down sophisticated networks that produce, transport, broker, finance, sell, and distribute illegal drugs. These efforts have resulted in some of the most significant arrests of traffickers and seizures of illicit drugs across the globe. HSI also continues to expand its Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST) footprint across the United States and uses this model to ensure a comprehensive interagency response to the continuous border security, public safety, and national security threat posed by drug trafficking organizations. HSI-led BEST teams – comprising officers from HSI's federal, state, and local partners – eliminate barriers and leverage the authorities and resources of HSI's partners in the fight to identify, investigate, disrupt, and dismantle TCOs at every level of operation.

To mitigate the human smuggling threat, HSI focuses its investigative efforts on smuggling networks that pose a national security and public safety risk, jeopardize lives, or engage in violence, abuse, hostage-taking, or extortion. In coordination with domestic and international partners, HSI targets and investigates all links in the human-smuggling chain, including overseas recruiters and organizers, fraudulent document vendors and facilitators, corrupt officials, financial facilitators, and transportation and employment infrastructures that facilitate and benefit from human smuggling. As a result, HSI and its partners have disrupted the efforts of several organizations attempting to smuggle humans into the United States from special interest countries, identified and dismantled pipelines used to smuggle undocumented noncitizens through Central and South America, seized millions of dollars from entities actively violating U.S. immigration and money laundering statutes, and dismantled networks of transportation and harboring cells that endanger undocumented noncitizens by exposure, abandonment, or unsafe transportation methods.

TCOs, including narcotics and human smuggling organizations, generate significant proceeds from their crimes, often in cash. To keep their proceeds and associated activities away from the scrutiny of financial regulators and law enforcement agencies, criminal actors avoid traditional financial institutions by repatriating their illicit proceeds across our borders through conveyances such as commercial and private aircraft, passenger and commercial vehicles, maritime vessels, and pedestrian crossings at our land borders. HSI diligently pursues these violations in an effort to disrupt TCO operations by identifying and seizing currency and assets attained through their criminal activities.

TCOs also require a steady supply of firearms and ammunition to assert control over the territory where they operate, eliminate rival criminal organizations, and resist government operations. In response, HSI focuses its weapons smuggling investigations on disrupting the illicit flow of firearms, firearms components, and ammunition from the United States to other countries. HSI special agents investigate individuals and criminal organizations that are responsible for the financing, procurement, brokering, transportation, and dissemination of firearms in support of TCOs. These efforts take weapons off the streets of our communities and prevent the smuggling of U.S. arms to other countries where they can be used to commit acts of violence.

TCOs such as MS-13 represent a significant threat to public safety in communities throughout the United States. Gangs commit violent crimes and facilitate criminal activity such as narcotics and firearms trafficking, sex trafficking, human smuggling and trafficking, and corruption. To combat this threat, HSI conducts multi-jurisdictional and international investigations that target gang leadership, members, and associates in the United States and abroad. HSI works closely with the Department of Justice to prosecute gang members and enterprises, often pursuing Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act, Violent Crimes in Aid of Racketeering (VICAR), and criminal conspiracy charges to disrupt and dismantle gang operations and organizations.

From narcotics smuggling to bulk cash smuggling to transnational gang violations, the investigations HSI conducts out of its domestic field offices represent an important part of the U.S. government's efforts to disrupt and dismantle TCOs linked to the Northern Triangle.

Joint Task Force Alpha

DHS and DOJ continue to identify strategies to counter the TCOs facilitating and profiting from the increased influx of migrants originating from Central America and Mexico and transiting to the United States. Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA) is one facet of the U.S. government's response to this problem.

Initiated by DOJ and launched in partnership with DHS, JTFA is a multiagency operation designed to identify, target, investigate, and prosecute known TCOs engaged in human smuggling from Mexico and/or through the Northern Triangle countries to the United States via the Southwest border. HSI is a primary partner of DOJ in this initiative. The aim of JTFA is to proactively investigate and prosecute those who are smuggling and trafficking individuals into the United States, with a particular focus on individuals and networks who abuse, exploit, or endanger those being smuggled; pose national security threats; or have links to transnational organized crime. In addition to investigations and prosecutions in the United States, JTFA seeks to work closely with foreign partners to ensure a coordinated, international response to illicit cross-border human

smuggling.

Drawing upon a wide range of resources across the government, JTFA leverages and synchronizes the intelligence, interdiction, investigative, and prosecutorial capabilities of HSI, CBP, and other partners to maximize efforts to counter transnational human smuggling networks that operate from and through Central America and Mexico to the United States. By unifying efforts and capitalizing upon the authorities, knowledge, and specialized skillsets and capabilities of each partner agency, the JTFA is better positioned to more effectively counter, mitigate, disrupt and ultimately dismantle the most significant human smuggling TCOs operating along and facilitating movement to the Southwest border.

Enhancing effective prosecution of HSI human smuggling investigations is a key component of JTFA's mission. Through FY 2020 and thus far in FY 2021, HSI has initiated more than 3,800 new human smuggling investigations, 69 of which have been designated as significant priority cases for HSI. DOJ has evaluated and identified a subset of these cases for inclusion in the initial JTFA efforts and will be the foundation of DOJ's prosecutorial focus.

As the primary law enforcement entities involved in JTFA, HSI and CBP field components review existing JTFA priority investigations and threats. Additionally, HSI and CBP jointly develop targeting, interdiction, investigative, and prosecutorial strategies for each new JTFA investigation. Field components lean on their respective local research and analytical components as much as possible to maximize information sharing and coordination of investigative and enforcement efforts.

HSI plays a critical role in the implementation of this initiative alongside its U.S. and international partners. HSI coordinates interdictions, investigations, and enforcement actions domestically and internationally; conducts intelligence analysis and document and media exploitation; facilitates deconfliction through established interagency centers; and supports prosecution and training. HSI has committed to doing this through assigning dedicated special agents and intelligence analysts to the JTFA at the headquarters level, within multiple domestic field offices, and within attaché offices in Central America and Mexico; by capitalizing on its strong foreign law enforcement partnerships; by leveraging existing international programs such as its TCIUs, BITMAP, and Operation Citadel; and by using its expert human and technological analysis capabilities. The integration of HSI's operations with the activities of DOJ, CBP, and other partner agencies participating in JTFA facilitates increased cooperation and unity-of-effort across all levels of government, domestically and abroad, in the fight to counter TCOs engaged in human smuggling, transnational gang activity, and other forms of cross-border crime that jeopardize the safety and security of the homeland.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your continued support of HSI and the critical investigative role it plays in investigating the TCOs that facilitate and profit from cross-border crimes. HSI remains committed to its mission to secure the homeland from transnational crime and threats and to uphold the national security and public safety of the United States.